

Professor says today's vampires are more about style than gore

October 18 2005

The real Count Dracula wasn't quite the pretty face that today's vampires boast in books, movies and at Halloween parties, says a Purdue University classics professor.

"Stories and traditions vary over time, and the Western world shifted from portraying vampires as repulsive and horrible to more human creatures that are sexually desirable and even sympathetic," says John T. Kirby, professor of classics and comparative literature. "This dramatic change really began with Anne Rice's remarkable series of vampire novels in the 1970s and other novels, films and television shows that followed her lead.

"While people are having fun with this new image of vampires, it's important to remember the historical figure who inspired vampire legend as we know it in the West today."

The Dracula legend is based on Vlad the Third, the prince of Wallachia, which is in present-day Romania. Vlad ruled during the Middle Ages and is considered a national hero in Romania for defending the country from invading Ottoman Turks.

"However, he was merciless in killing thousands of both the Turks and, shockingly, his own people," says Kirby, who is teaching an honors class this spring on vampires in folklore, fiction and film, as well as leading a study abroad program during spring break to Transylvania, which is in modern-day Romania. "Because his favorite method of execution was to

impale people on a stake, he's known as Vlad the Impaler."

His other nickname was Drakulya, which means son of the dragon. Vlad's father, Vlad II of Wallachia, was a member of the Order of the Dragon. From this knightly order, the older Vlad adopted the nickname Drakul. Kirby says it was Bram Stoker's "Dracula" novel in 1897 that made the connection between traditional vampire lore and Vlad the Third.

"However, with the popularity today of 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer' and 'Interview with a Vampire,' it's much easier to imagine vampires as objects of desire, not just of pure revulsion," Kirby says.

Source: Purdue University

Citation: Professor says today's vampires are more about style than gore (2005, October 18)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2005-10-professor-today-vampires-style-gore.html>

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